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A TRUE-FALSE TEST IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Perhaps there is no subject in which examinations are more irksome and undesirable than in English. A mathematics teacher may find examinations useful as a means of determining the degree of skill which his pupils have acquired. The teacher of history is able to ascertain the extent to which his class has grasped the facts which his course has presented. To these teachers examinations, though burdensome, are useful instruments of measurement, but to the English teacher this is hardly so.

The great concern of the teacher of English literature is not the development of skills or the imparting of facts. To the historian it may be important to know whether the Abbess of Saint Hilda was the head of Whitby or of Saint Cuthbert's; to the reader of *Marmion* it matters little. In fact, he little cares about the historicity of Marmion himself, so long as the hero lives and moves before him in the poem, so long as he is a bold and valiant soldier, a person whom the reader knows in fancy. The desire of the English teacher is that his class shall see and know Marmion; that they shall live through the poem and become the richer emotionally; that they shall see its beauty, be thrilled by its movement and, when they have finished the poem, be eager to read *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. If they forget the story, well and good, so long as they never forget the mystery of the Palmer or the tragedy of Constance de Beverley.

In other words, the English teacher's chief aim is to teach his students to enjoy good literature. He would have them shudder at the fate of Fortunato and moralize upon *The Ambitious Guest*. He would have them weep at the death of Ameera and laugh at the jumping frog. There are beings whom he would introduce that are better known, and more worth knowing, than many of the actual figures of history—Malvolio and Falstaff, Becky Sharp

and Miss Mowcher; yes, Tristram Shandy and Pamela. Whether the student become an instructor in manual training in a small country town, a traveling salesman for a boot and shoe concern, or a community nurse, life will be the richer and the happier for having friends upon the shelves of the library in addition to the casual acquaintances of the magazine stalls in the subway.

Consequently the teacher does his best to make his class interesting. He works up social and historical backgrounds. He relates catchy incidents. He attempts to make poetry live in the classroom. He encourages discussion. He tempts his class with carefully chosen literary morsels, doing his best to make them read their assignments and read them with pleasure—until one dark day looms ahead.

Then the students begin to whisper of examinations. They begin to cause themselves mental indigestion by feeding with feverish haste upon back assignments. They begin to pile up the facts about Shakespeare until they can hardly remember whether a certain "fact" is a fact or that the "fact" is that it is not a fact. In the meanwhile Viola languishes, Titania's fairy world is like the chart of the administrative scheme of a school system, and the lugubrious Jacques becomes a hard word to spell.

Then comes the day of the examination. The teacher has resolved that the questions shall appear very learned so that they may make a good impression for himself and the college. The students are nervous and write for dear life. Because Mr. Chesterton is quoted as saying that Dickens was born into the limelight they write that he was born in the Limelight District of London. They spell horribly, they write wretchedly. Paragraphs simply do not exist. All the plain rules of composition which they have observed in the last smug theme on "Signs of Spring" are a forgotten dream. It is just as though they were writing for another teacher. They hand in their papers and leave the room. That is the end of that drudgery. Thank goodness, they don't have to study any more English—that is, if they pass! The large pile of blue-coated booklets has yet to be examined. The less said about that the better.

If this type of examination could be superseded, in part, by something which would check the students' reading to insure that

assignments had been read, which might indicate in some degree their appreciation of the works that they had studied, and which would, at the same time, partake more of the general pleasant character of an English course, it would be to the advantage of all concerned. A test of this type can be constructed in the true-false form which is being successfully used in scientific examination papers. It is well worth the extra trouble taken in its preparation.

The test which accompanies this paper is an adaptation of the true-false type of examination to the subject of English. It was given to two classes of freshmen. Not only was it a pleasure to the instructor but the students were enthusiastic; and the classroom, instead of being in an uncomfortable, jaded condition, was bubbling over with amusement and laughter. There was no embarrassment. It was like a new game of skill, played for stakes.

We had been studying Pope's "Rape of the Lock," following on through Addison to the study of the essay and then treating of Samuel Johnson and his circle. The assignments for class reading were almost entirely the work of the authors studied. The only exceptions to this were a short passage in Traill's *Social England* and about twenty pages for intensive study in Compton-Ricketts' admirable little outline of English Literature in the *Peoples Books* edition. The remainder of the work consisted of lectures, readings, and discussions, besides the regular work in composition.

The examination, which was read aloud to the class with a short pause between questions, contained these statements:

1. The Age of Satire extended roughly from the middle of the sixteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth.
2. For the most part, the life of Pope fell within the Age of Satire.
3. The same may be said of Addison.
4. Although Dryden wrote early in this period he is not to be compared in greatness with the other writers of the time.
5. The assignment in Traill's *Social England*, in addition to providing an account of the social background of the period, gives several interesting anecdotes about Addison and Steele.
6. This assignment gave an account of the way ladies and gentlemen dressed in the period.
7. The Age of Satire begins at the Restoration of Charles the Second.
8. Pope was born about the time of the accession of William the Third.
9. Part of his works were written during the reign of Queen Anne.
10. The first of the Georges had come to the throne before the death of Pope.

11. Pope wrote the "Dunciad."
12. Gay wrote "The Beggar's Opera" and "The Shepherd's Week."
13. Gay knew Pope.
14. Pope knew Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.
15. Prior was also a friend of Pope.
16. "Prior more nearly approaches Pope than any other contemporary in the technical excellence of his work and in epigrammatic power."
17. Shakespeare discovered blank verse by substituting unrhymed endings in some of Pope's poems.
18. "Dryden, like Jonson, was the literary dictator of his age, presiding at Will's coffee house in undisputed supremacy among the wits of his time."
19. Reynolds, Johnson, Fielding, Richardson, and Boswell were all members of the literary club which met at Will's coffee house.
20. Every one of the three dramatists, Wycherly, Congreve, and Sheridan, belongs to the Age of Satire.
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35. It is evident from "The Rape of the Lock" that Pope's chief aim in writing it was to bring about social reform.
36. The central idea of the poem was taken by Pope from one of the French romances of the day.
37. Although Belinda is charming and beautiful, she is not represented as devout or noble.
38. She is trivial and dull.
39. Pope's handling of the sylphs is at times clumsy.
40. In lightness of conception and whimsical colorfulness the sylphs of the poem are the work of a great poet.
41. Although "The Rape of the Lock" does not appeal to the deeper emotions, it delights the fancy.
42. It is full of beauty.
43. It is full of wit.
44. But it lacks polish.
45. It cannot be called a satire.
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55. The paragraph is a complete part in itself and need not be related to the rest of the composition.
56. The principles of unity, emphasis, and coherence are valid for all forms of composition.
57. E. V. Lucas is an American essayist.
58. Arnold Bennett wrote "How to Live on Twenty Four Hours a Day" and "Days Off."
59. Mr. Chesterton's work may be truly described as humorous, paradoxical and clever.
60. E. V. Lucas is a keen literary critic.
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71. The following lines are from Pope's "Rape of the Lock":

Should such a man too fond to rule alone,
 Bear like the Turk, no brother near the throne,
 View him with scornful, yet with jealous eyes,
 And hate for arts that caused himself to rise;
 Damn with faint praise, assent with evil leer,
 And without sneering teach the rest to sneer.

72. Of the following selections *A* is the best:

A. My heart leaps up when I behold
 A rainbow in the sky:
 So was it when my life began
 So is it now I am a man,
 So be it when I shall grow old,
 Or let me die.

B. My soul within me jumps to see,
 A rainbow paint the sky,
 Or to see the sunset stain the West
 And the ruddy clouds go by.
 It makes me dream of a happy time
 In the days of bye and bye.

73. Of the two *B* is not the best but it is fairly good.

KEY TO TEST: +TRUE, -FALSE

Question No.	Question No.	Question No.	Question No.
1. -	11. +	35. -	45. -
2. +	12. +	36. -	55. -
3. +	13. +	37. +	56. +
4. -	14. +	38. -	57. -
5. -	15. +	39. -	58. -
6. +	16. +	40. +	59. +
7. +	17. -	41. +	60. +
8. +	18. +	42. +	71. -
9. +	19. -	43. +	72. +
10. +	20. +	44. -	73. -

After the reading of the statements the papers were exchanged, the key was read, the answers checked and the total recorded at the top of the paper by the students.

Forty-nine students answered the paper. The number of wrong responses to each statement is interesting and valuable to the instructor.

NUMBER OF STUDENTS GETTING EACH QUESTION WRONG

Question No.	Question No.	Question No.	Question No.
1. 13	11. 19	35. 11	45. 3
2. 1	12. 9	36. 8	55. 2
3. 2	13. 7	37. 6	56. 1
4. 14	14. 10	38. 27	57. 5
5. 14	15. 11	39. 2	58. 16
6. 6	16. 24	40. 1	59. 4
7. 15	17. 2	41. 4	60. 22
8. 31	18. 18	42. 4	71. 24
9. 19	19. 34	43. 1	72. 9
10. 22	20. 14	44. 2	73. 29

It is enough to break a teacher's heart to find that there is even one in his classes who thinks Pope slovenly, or who believes that a paragraph need not be related to the rest of the composition. He feels better to find that his garble of Wordsworth's lyric is generally recognized, in half a minute, to be sentimental and trite. It is something to feel that your class knows how to put a sunset in its place. Then there is the satisfaction of finding that one important lesson upon the necessity of coherence in composition has actually trickled through to the last languid brain.

Such an examination has the advantage of being a labor saving device, especially to the teacher. It has the further advantage of being a matter of enjoyment to both student and teacher. It is important to relieve the class in English literature of all that is disagreeable and annoying.

I once asked a young lad in high school if he ever read Shakespeare for amusement. "I guess not," he replied, "we had *Julius Caesar* in class last year and that's enough for me." As only too frequently happens, his English teacher, assisted by a blundering course of study, had succeeded in quenching the smoking flax of youthful interest.

It is very easy to lose a sense of proportion in teaching English. In the end, however, good teaching demands that whatever tends to make the fine things of English literature tiresome, whatever goes to make the English class a bore and a burden must, as far as possible, give place to the interesting and the pleasant. Even examinations should be as inoffensive and attractive as possible. It is not well to be too zealous in the cause of the registrar.